

THE MAN FROM HEADQUARTERS

When Romance Stepped
In and Out of the
Wedding-Present Room

All dramatic rights reserved by the author

By EDITH
SESSIONS TUPPER

Illustrated by Will Grefé



"It's Very Becoming, Isn't It?" He Drawled

THIS way, Manning." Millard swung the portière aside and entered the library. Manning, cool, inscrutable, perfectly groomed and immaculately dressed, followed him. He put down his hat, removed his top coat, looked deliberately about, selected the seat in the deep recessed window as a receptacle for his belongings, deposited them thereon, and returned to Millard's side at an immense table laden with the wedding-presents.

There was the usual brilliant array of silver, bronze, jewels and candelabra. The table glittered and shone with a dazzling radiance calculated to satisfy the most exacting of brides.

"A beautiful lay-out, Mr. Millard," said Manning, as he contemplated all this splendor.

"Yes," returned Millard, a fussy, important little man with "money" stamped all over him, "worth a good many thousands."

"I dare say," as if thoughtfully estimating the exact amount represented.

"Worth five thousand dollars more this afternoon," said Millard ruefully, "than it is now."

"You value the emerald bracelet at that figure?" asked Manning.

"That is what my son paid for it last week," said Millard, puffing out his chest like a pouter pigeon, "a present for his favorite sister on her wedding-day."

"Humph!" was Manning's reply. Then suddenly: "And who saw the presents this afternoon?"

"A dozen women, possibly, all intimate friends of my daughter."

"Ah, the feminine touch!" said Manning, as if to himself. "The—er—the servants?" interrogatively.

"I can vouch for everyone of them," declared Millard with emphasis. "All have been in my service for years."

"Ah, yes," said Manning gently, "I see."

"Manning," said Millard in a sudden burst of confidence, "when I phoned headquarters to send up a man, my idea was that whoever was sent should stand guard over the gifts. Since then I have been thinking the matter over. I want to discover the thief. What can we do?"

"No one knows of my presence here to-night?" asked Manning.

"Not a soul."

"Very well," looking about, "if I could conceal myself somewhere—why of course, the window—the very place." He went up and began drawing the heavy curtains across. "If the thief should first look behind these curtains—"

"That in itself would be suspicious," interrupted Millard.

"I said the thief," returned Manning dryly.

"Oh yes, exactly, why of course!" guffawed Millard. "How stupid of me!"

Manning did not dispute this statement, but continued to adjust the curtains. When they

were arranged to his satisfaction, he crossed the room and locked a door leading to a back hall. Then he tried the various windows, locking each. Millard watched these proceedings, his pop eyes nearly bulging from his head. It was an astonishing experience for him to find a real detective in his house, going about taking liberties with his doors and windows.

"You think the thief may make another attempt?" he asked.

"Oh, you never can tell," replied Manning. "We will set our trap. Who knows? We may catch a bird."

"Well, I must be off," said Millard; "I shall be needed. I wish you luck."

"Oh—er," said Manning, standing between the curtains, "in case anything should develop, do you wish an arrest?"

Millard hesitated a moment, reflecting on the nasty scandal which might ensue, then said: "Well, no, not if you can get the bracelet without."

"Oh, I will get it," returned Manning confidently. "I am pretty fortunate at this sort of thing."

"By the way, Manning," said Millard as he reached the library door, "I will send you up a bottle of my choicest Burgundy."

"Thank you, Mr. Millard," said the detective. "I never drink while I am on duty."

"Oh, well, I will send it," persisted Millard, "and later you may sample it." He drew the portière and closed the door behind him.

*

Manning seated himself in the recessed window and listened to the faint sound of the dance music below stairs. He wished he might smoke, but realizing that the odor of a cigar would betray his presence, was forced to forego that luxury. After all, was not his quest absurd? Ten to one, the society Raffles who had purloined the jewel would not return to the library. Still there was the mere chance. The presents were carelessly displayed and supposed to be absolutely unguarded. So the man from headquarters sat with alert ear listening for the first footfall.

Suddenly the soft swish of a woman's gown was heard and there floated to him a faint rare perfume, that evidently recalled some pleasant experience, for he smiled and rose hastily to look between the curtains. Bending over the table of gifts was a charming figure—a girl with a high-bred face, crowned with hair like spun gold. She went from present to present, touching each lightly, as a butterfly might dart from flower to flower. She lifted one jewel, an ornament for the hair, from its case and regarded it thoughtfully and with a little impertinent look of surprise.

The eyes behind the curtain watched her ceaselessly; but there was no hint of suspicion in their depths, rather a caressing light that seemed at variance with the stern, impassive face.

As she stood thus surveying the jewel, there was a shrill ripple of laughter outside on the stairs, coupled with the sound of a man's voice. Manning heard the door into the front hall open, then the tinkle of metal rings as the heavy portière swung back, then the rustle of a silken frock.

"A glorious waltz, Bobby!" he heard a musical,

metallic voice say. "You have my step to perfection. But do you know I am so keen to see the presents again. Ah! Kitty!" Although the tone was one of assumed cordiality, the detective instantly recognized its insincerity.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Pomeroy," said the girl coolly, as she laid the jewel back in its case. "Ah, Bobby," addressing the man with good-natured contempt, "dancing as usual? Don't wear yourself out. Dancing is hard work, you know," and absolutely ignoring the woman, the girl quietly left the room.

"Blank her!" said the man, looking after her with a black scowl.

"With all my heart," echoed the woman. "But come, look at the presents. See! there is the dinner service from Mr. and Mrs. Millard. I must say I don't think they hurt their bank-account much on that, eh, Bobby?"

"It is rather a rum old service," assented Bobby.

"That string of pearls is rather smart, don't you think? Although pearls are grown so common—everybody and nobody wears them now. This bronze is rather good—still the Livingstones might have sent much better—they are so disgustingly rich. But then, too, they are so mean."

"By Jove!" from Bobby. "Look at the spoons!"

"Oh, bother!" was the impatient retort. "Who wants to look at spoons? You can see them any day. I want to see the out-of-ordinary things. For Heaven's sake, Bobby, look at this candlestick!" She read the card with it: "From Mrs. Mark Pendleton! She got it at Jones's bargain counter, a dollar ninety-eight."

"Oh, come now, Adelaide," said Bobby, "how do you know that?"

"I bought one myself there just like it for a Christmas present," returned Adelaide with a low laugh. "Oh, there is a Bible! Fancy! Who sent that?"

It was Bobby's turn to read: "From Aunt Cynthia." "Hurrah for Aunt Cynthia!" he added with approbation.

"Is that the rich aunt for whom they are all waiting?" queried Adelaide.

"Yes."

"Worth ten millions," returned Adelaide. "Yes, those rich aunts worth ten millions usually send Bibles. But I don't see it here anywhere. It was here this afternoon."

"What was here?" asked Bobby.

"The emerald bracelet," said Adelaide.

Now for the first time the man behind the curtains showed interest in the conversation. He cautiously peered through an infinitesimal space between the draperies. He recognized "Bobby" as Robert Dow, one of the best-known of the gilded youth and dissipated sports of the town. The woman he had never seen. She was tall and lithe. Her face, turned full toward Manning, was hand-